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FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5618
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000841

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/24/2018

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SUBJECT: UNSCO SERRY: SARG VIEWS ON SYRIAN AND PALESTINIAN TRACKS, PALESTINIAN RECONCILIATION

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: UN Special Coordinator Robert Serry concluded a two-day visit to Damascus by briefing diplomats on his discussions with FM Muallim and VFM Miqdad. According to Serry, Muallim signaled continuing SARG interest in the Syrian-Israeli track but conditioned the holding of a fifth round of talks upon receipt of an Israeli response to Syria's six points on territory. Muallim also said that the Syrian and Palestinian tracks were "mutually reinforcing" and that one could not proceed without the other. On Gaza, Muallim claimed a personal role in persuading Hamas to stop firing Qassam rockets. Muallim supported the Hamas decision not to attend the Egyptian-sponsored Palestinian reconciliation talks, charging that Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas was not "ready to meet (Hamas leader) Khalid Mesha'al on equal terms" and that Egypt's bias toward Fatah had resulted in a process tantamount to a "diktat" to Hamas. Serry advised the SARG to continue taking constructive steps as it attempts to establish a better relationship with the new U.S. administration; Muallim acknowledged that an improvement in relations was not likely to be a rapid process. End summary.

¶2. (C) UN Special Coordinator (UNSCO) Robert Serry briefed diplomats November 25 on his meetings with SARG officials the previous day. Serry met with FM Walid al-Muallim and was hosted for lunch by VFM Faisal Miqdad as part of his second visit to Damascus as UNSCO; he was promised a meeting with President Bashar al-Assad on his next visit. Serry's briefing for diplomats was hosted by the Netherlands ambassador. Also attending were the ambassadors of Spain, UK, Russia, and Turkey, the UN country team and UNDP head, and the charges d'affaires of France, Germany, and the U.S.

¶3. (C) Serry referred to the SARG's somewhat strained relations with the UN in recent years, noting that the UN had always formed one of the "pillars" of the SARG's foreign policy. In his meeting with Muallim, the FM referred once again to the SARG's unhappiness that Terje Roed Larsen continued in New York as a "counterpart" to newly-designated UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon Michael Williams. Serry commented that he intends to visit Damascus as often as every three months in order to build better relations between the SARG and the UN and to monitor developments on the Syrian-Israeli indirect talks.

SARG IS WAITING FOR GOI ANSWERS FOR FIFTH ROUND

¶4. (C) Admitting he had avoided the topic of Lebanon, Serry said that he and Muallim had devoted most of their time to discussing the Syria) Israel track. Muallim told him clearly that the SARG was conditioning its participation in a fifth round of indirect talks on receiving the GOI's response to the six points (on territory) the SARG had sent some time ago via the Turks. The SARG was prepared to continue the process but was interested only in substantive meetings. There had been some pressure from the Israeli side to meet, according to Muallim, but the SARG had learned "from history" that the difficult issues related to territory had to be

dealt with up front. He also said that the SARG had deposited with the Turks its own response to Israel's six points (on security) and that the Turks understood they were to provide them to the GOI once the GOI had responded on the SARG issues. Muallim had also said that the Syrian and Palestinian tracks were to be "mutually reinforcing" and must proceed simultaneously ("one track cannot go forward without the other"). The SARG had had "good contacts" with Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas, Muallim said, and they had agreed that they "can't go forward alone."

ISRAELI VIEWS OF THE TWO TRACKS

15. (C) Serry also reported that, in their last conversation, GOI advisor Shalom Touregeman argued that outgoing PM Ehud Olmert may well want to concentrate on the Syrian track since, according to Touregeman, the Palestinians "had missed another chance by not accepting Olmert's 'generous' offers." Serry commented that Touregeman has consistently demonstrated a bias in favor of pursuing the Syria track. Upcoming elections in Israel, however, had complicated the issue with FM Tzipi Livni appearing to distance herself even further from Olmert's position, particularly in the wake of his late October interview in which he reportedly said Israel must return to the 1967 borders. Serry believed it was unclear as to what Livni's preferences were at the moment in pursuing either track.

SITUATION IN GAZA

16. (C) With a long preamble regarding the difficulties for
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UNSCO and other UN operations in Gaza as a result of the Israeli closure, Serry recounted that UNSYG Ban had called PM Olmert the previous week and found Olmert's promise to look into the situation promising. A subsequent call from Livni had not gone as well, Serry said, and had prompted Ban to issue a statement critical of the GOI's actions. According to Serry, the UNSYG "had not appreciated" the tough conversation he'd had with Livni.

17. (C) Serry said that Muallim had claimed a role in stopping the firing of Qassam rockets from Gaza into Israel and asked if that claim was valid. UK Ambassador Simon Collis recounted the chain of events during FS David Miliband's November 19-20 visit during which Muallim called Miliband to report that he had asked Hamas leader Khalid Mesha'al to stop the rockets in response to Miliband's comment that the Qassams were building support for Likud leader Binyamin Netanyahu. Serry said he believed that the SARG wants the tahdiya (calming) to succeed but remains worried about the internal Palestinian political situation. The West Bank and Gaza, he said, are like two ships heading off in different directions; in UNSCO's view, the Palestinian divide must be tackled as a fundamental element of any progress in the peace process.

PALESTINIAN RECONCILIATION

18. (C) Serry said Muallim had been "surprisingly open" about the emergence of two blocs in the Arab world regarding the Palestinians. One the one hand, supporting Hamas, were Syria, Qatar, and Algeria, and on the other, supporting Fatah, were Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. Muallim reportedly lamented the divide but also noted that it would limit any progress at the November 26 Arab League Ministerial in Cairo. Muallim commented that the SARG finds that Mahmoud Abbas is "not sufficiently ready to meet Khalid Mesha'al on equal terms" and found that the planned, ultimately canceled reconciliation meeting in Cairo had resembled a "diktat" from the Egyptians. The mediator, opined Muallim, should be equidistant from the two parties and the "Egyptians are too close to Fatah." As evidence, Muallim asked why couldn't Egypt open up the Rafah crossing more frequently as a means

of reducing the pressure on Hamas in Gaza. Muallim expressed SARG concern that Hamas should have real influence in a future PA government. The Cairo document, which Serry described as merely an "annotated agenda," would entail the creation of five committees that would take, as Palestinian negotiator Ahmad Qurei'a told Serry, "five years to work through," and would take a long time to achieve results. In the context of relating the SARG's concerns, Serry observed that there were also hard-line Fatah figures who saw the reconciliation process as a "ploy" that would enable them to continue their current roles. He noted that Palestinian PM Salam Fayyad, however, seemed genuinely interested in reconciliation. Regarding the Syrian approach, however, Serry concluded that the SARG still sees Hamas as a valuable tool and a card they can play in any future Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement.

U.S.) SARG RELATIONS

¶9. (C) Muallim told Serry that the SARG wants to establish a better relationship with the incoming Obama Administration but realizes that the process will not be rapid. Serry advised Muallim that the SARG should continue the constructive steps it had taken recently since the new administration will be watching SARG behavior already. If 2009 was indeed to be an important year in the region, Serry told Muallim it was important that all the tracks be preserved until the new administration was in a position to begin working on them. The UNSYG, he said, had been sending a similar message in his contacts with the Obama transition team) there were fragile and disparate elements of peace-making in the region (Syrian-Israeli and Palestinian-Israeli tracks, Annapolis, Arab Peace initiative) that needed to be preserved until the U.S. was ready to move.

¶10. (C) Comment: Serry's briefing was candid but, given his disparate audience, essentially uncritical of SARG positions, particularly concerning Hamas's role in Gaza violence and in obstructing the Palestinian reconciliation process. Serry remarked that he had found his discussions with Muallim to have been quite useful in clarifying SARG views on the Syrian-Israeli track and that he had even obtained Muallim's direct phone number which he thought would be useful in building better lines of communication between UNSCO and the SARG.

CONNELLY